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Sometimes They Come Back (Some of Them)
Serialization, remaking, nostalgia. The case of Xbox Live Arcade

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Serialization and transformation

The aim of this paper is to address the idea of the series in relation to video games and explore some of the ways in which the process of serialization is reshaping our vision of the history of this medium. I will argue that one of the ways in which designers, producers and distributors deal with the history of the medium is through serialization, that is through the process of grouping under a common denominator a certain number of texts produced in the past, in order to highlight some of their similarities. This process produces series, often composed of preexisting cultural artifacts, that are subsequently re-presented in a different manner.

My research is exploratory in nature, since the processes I will describe are often used as objects of epistemological inquiry in relation to their relevance within the economy of the video game industry, but rarely analyzed as historical or archival practices, capable of creating new meanings around existing texts. Nevertheless, I hope this paper will show some heuristic value for the scholars willing to explore in depth the various ways in which the video game medium confronts its past and employs archival practices that are often highly complex and ambiguous.

I would like to start with a disambiguation on the use of terms such as series or serialization, in order to define a set of concepts which will be analyzed later on. As we know, some media are inclined towards serial production; the episodic TV series, the dilated film franchise, the fragmented and dispersed narrative threads within the serial comic are all excellent examples of a strategy that often traces back to the origins of these media. This type of serial strategy has been defined by Umberto Eco as the “return of the identical,”¹ that is a communicative strategy where narrative elements such as characters, situations or goals are presented multiple times in order to create a familiarity with the reader and, at the same time, manipulate or play with her previous knowledge of the series. Video games do participate in this strategy in ways that seem borrowed from other media. A serial approach is employed in franchises, such as *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix, 1987 -) or *Halo* (Bungie, 2001-), in games sold in episodes, such as those produced by Telltale Games or *Penny Arcade Adventures* (Hothead Games, 2008), or in games such as the last *Alone in The Dark* (Atari, 2008) that replicate some of the narrative strategies of the TV series format such as recaps and cliff hangers. In this case serialization is a process that involves the repetition and multiplication of narrative elements and the creation of threads that are expanded over long periods of time and 'broken down into pieces', eventually creating a series.

I would like to address here a different type of series. A series that fits within a wider and looser definition such as this:

A group of separately published works related in subject and/or form, issued in succession (numbered or unnumbered) by a single publisher or distributor, usually in uniform style, each bearing, in addition to its own title, a collective or series title applied by the publisher to the group as a whole. The individual volumes or parts may not share the same author or

¹ Umberto Eco, “Innovation & repetition: between modern & postmodern aesthetics,” in *Daedalus*, Fall 2005, Vol. 134, No. 4, p. 196. See also Umberto Eco, “Tipologia della ripetizione”, in Francesco Casetti (ed.), *L'immagine al plurale. Serialità e ripetizione nel cinema e nella televisione*, Marsilio, Venezia, 1984.

editor, nor is it necessary for them to be published at regular intervals.²

Corpora of texts consistent with this definition can be easily found within the literary market. Series such as these are composed of separately published novels, related in genre and/or format, and bearing a collective series title. Two notable cases are the Italian science fiction series *Urania* or the french crime series *Série noire*.³ The single texts appearing as episodes in the series are not connected by a consistent narrative or by a set of recurring characters, but are independent, unrelated novels that share common traits (genre affiliation in the case of *Urania* and *Série noire*) and are subsequently *serialized*. In most cases, these literary series are composed of texts that had already been published separately (such is the case of American novels translated and re-printed both in *Urania* and *Série noire*) and had had a previous circulation in other contexts. In these cases, the series constitutes a space where preexisting texts are collected. This process, however, is not transparent nor innocent, since texts have to be adapted in order to fit within the series' standards. In some cases, this practice involves the use of ancillary materials to convey the rightful affiliation of a text to a series. These materials, described by Gerard Genette as “publisher peritexts,” are often designed with the intention of highlighting the similarities between the present text and the others in the series. Discussing these second-degree materials, Genette writes:

I give the name *publisher's peritext* to the whole zone of the peritext that is the direct and principal (but not exclusive) responsibility of the publisher (or perhaps, to be more abstract but also more exact, of the *publishing house*) – that is, the zone that exists merely by the fact that a book is published and possibly republished and offered to the public in one or several more or less varied presentations. [...] We are dealing here with the outermost peritext (the cover, the title page, and their appendages) and with the book's material construction (selection of format, of paper, of typeface and so forth), which is executed by the typesetter and printer but decided on by the publisher, possibly in consultation with the author.⁴

The affiliation of a text to a series is then communicated through aesthetic markers (peritexts) that connect different texts (fig. 1). In some cases, more radical means are employed in order to create consistency within the series. One famous example is that of the literary series of Giallo Mondadori⁵, an Italian series of crime novels that in its first years of existence was known to publish reduced and amended versions of English and American texts. Often, translators omitted certain paragraphs in order to make the novel fit within a given number of pages, carrying out a format-related restriction; in other cases violent or morally ambiguous parts of the novels were censored⁶.

Xbox Live Arcade: Series and archive

I would like to address now the ways in which these strategies are operating in video games, their peculiar nature and their effects on historiographical and archival practices related to this medium. Specifically, I will focus on the processes of serialization that take place in on line marketplaces such as Xbox Live or PlayStation Network. Within these platforms, games are often divided into various series; this grouping process may be explicit (the series has a title and distinct aesthetic markers) or implicit (no common title is given, but other hints – such as a common set of

2 Definition of “series” in Joan M. Reitz, *Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, Libraries Unlimited, Englewood 2004, p. 651.

3 *Urania*, published by Mondadori, Milano, was founded in 1952, while *Série noire*, published by Gallimard, Paris, in 1945. Both series are still active.

4 Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (*Seuils*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1987), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, p. 16.

5 *Giallo Mondadori*, published by Mondadori, Milano, was founded in 1946 and is still active.

6 On censorship and amendment in the Italian literary market, see Francesco Spurio, “Censura e veleni fascisti. Le traduzioni di Agatha Christie degli anni Trenta,” *Tradurre*, online at <<http://rivistatradurre.it/?p=292>>, last visit 4 August 2011.

semiotic features – are provided). On a functional level, this strategy of serialization serves as a tool for the user to effectively browse the marketplace, that is explored through subsequent refinements (series and sub-series). This model, though, influences the way in which games – especially older or “classic” games – are presented and triggers some speculations on the means and effects of their (re-)circulation. The ways in which preexisting games are re-presented in these series and the modifications that they inevitably undergo in order to fit within them highlights the transformative nature of the process of serialization. One of the most popular and diverse series hosted in an online marketplace is the Xbox Live Arcade Series. The Xbox Live Arcade service was launched in December 2004 for the original Xbox console and then re-launched one year later on the Xbox 360. Since 2005, games are released on Wednesdays only, thus reinforcing chronologically the idea of serialization that seems to inform the commercial strategy of Xbox Live Arcade. The service features now 369 games⁷. In an interview with online magazine IGN, the founder of Xbox Live Arcade Greg Canessa stated: «At its core, we were emphatic about Arcade being simple, quick, fun, downloadable games experiences at lower costs for gamers. That was the guiding principle».⁸ On the one hand, then, Xbox Live Arcade acts as an online distribution service, selling products that would not be competitive in the mainstream market, but that very well fit various marketing niches. In distributive terms it is an example of what Chris Anderson calls the “Long Tail dynamic,”⁹ where niche products are sold through very effective and cheap distributive channels such as an online marketplace for downloadable contents. Nevertheless, I argue that this is not the only relevant aspect of a service such as Xbox Live Arcade. One of the most striking features of this series is the massive presence of older games. Out of 369 titles featured on Xbox Live Arcade, 186 were produced specifically for the market of downloadable contents; the remaining 183 are older games that are re-presented in various forms. Roughly fifty percent of the body of titles featured in Xbox Live Arcade is composed of pure ports (e.g. *Dig Dug* [Namco, 1982]), full remakes (e.g. *Bionic Commando Rearmed* [Capcom, 2008]), sequels or prequels to franchise titles (e.g. *Dead Space Ignition* [Sumo Digital, 2010]) and other games that fit within more than one of these categories. It is obviously very difficult (and maybe a bit obsessive) to trace definitive distinctions among ports, remakes, emulations, etc., but what stands out in this case is the significant amount of games that are related to older titles and that contribute to a re-circulation of preexisting texts (fig. 2). As a collection of old video games (and, consequently, as a mean of canonization), Xbox Live Arcade is an interesting object for analysis, since its serializing nature enacts a transformative process on the games that are included in the series. On a superficial level, by becoming a part of the corpus of Xbox Live Arcade, games from the past undergo three main processes: 1) They are serialized, since they enter a movement where they are uniformed in their appearance (fig. 3) and are released regularly over time; 2) They are archived, since, after released, they are all available at the same time and can be browsed and downloaded. Xbox Live Arcade's aim is certainly not one of preservation of historical games¹⁰, nevertheless Microsoft's online delivery service can be said to employ a basic archival practice. One in which old games find what Jacques Derrida describes as «domiciliation», a place where «they dwell permanently, [...] [an] institutional passage from the private to the public».¹¹ 3) They are re-modeled in order to “fit the bill” of Xbox Live Arcade. This last process is particularly interesting since it reveals some of the ways the video game industry deals with the past of the medium and some connections between historiography and re-circulation of older games.

I would like to devote the last part of this paper to the analysis of some of these

7 These data were collected in March 2011. As of today (February 2013) the number of games on Xbox Live Arcade has grown to over 500, but the ratio between new titles and reworked material has remained almost identical.

8 Douglass C. Perry, “XBLA: Greg Canessa Interview, Pt. 1,” *IGN*, online at <<http://uk.Xboxlive.ign.com/articles/721/721121p1.html>>, last visit 4 August 2011.

9 Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion, New York, 2006.

10 A fitting example of a preservation strategy within the realm of digital games would be the MAME (Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator) project. See <http://mamedev.org/>.

11 Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Summer 1995, p. 10.

transformations. As a methodological tool, I am willing to adopt a pragmatical perspective, as suggested by Rick Altman in his work on film genres, a perspective that

[R]efuses determinacy to textual structures taken alone, but in addition it acknowledges the difficulty of extracting those textual structures from the institutions and social habits that frame them and lend them the appearance of making meaning on their own.¹²

That is: a perspective that focuses not just on textual qualities, but analyzes paratexts (peripheral texts such as menus, start screens, etc., promotional material, trailers), evidences of the reception of the analyzed games and the set of meanings constructed around their release in order to build a wider picture of these peculiar practice of serialization. In this perspective, two questions one might ask are: What happens to video games from the past when they are launched in Xbox Live Arcade? In which ways are they transformed or remodeled and why?

Sub-series, meta-games

One common practice in Xbox Live Arcade is the creation of sub-series, that regroup games in smaller series in order to suggest a more specific identification of common traits. These “series of the second degree” are sometimes made explicit, as in the case of *Sega Vintage Collection* (fig. 4), composed of a group of games, all released by Sega in the late Eighties/early Nineties. In this case, the affiliation of the games to the sub-series is revealed by an opening menu that is common to all games and by the logo of the collection. This type of framing aims at creating a familiarity among the games, thus breeding a series within the series. In other cases, sub-series are not named, but their existence is conveyed through common representational traits. The particular series (figg. 5-6), that I would define the “Namco-retrogaming series”, is composed of titles produced in the early Eighties, that are presented in a standardized manner. Opening menus are rendered in a consistent graphical style (the diagonal lines of menu items, the positioning of the title in the top-left corner, etc.), while the games are enclosed in a frame that explicitly evokes that of an arcade machine. The first remodeling strategy is then of a cosmetic nature and it involves re-designing some of the peripheral parts of the games (such as the menus) in order to convey the affiliation to a sub-series. Since no explicit sign of a process of serialization other than this aesthetic framing is employed by Xbox Live Arcade, the strategy behind the “Namco-retrogaming series” is one of “soft” serialization, where the archivist's task of dividing and grouping items is achieved cooperatively by the publisher (who provides graphical/semiotic clues) and the user (who perceives and recognizes them, thus building the notion of series). My act of arbitrarily naming the series “Namco-retrogaming series” may be seen as a consequence of this cooperative, pragmatical form of serialization.

Another strategy that operates on many of the older games collected in Xbox Live Arcade is one of technological update. This process may have different forms. The most evident of these is that of the full remake (a practice that, in itself, deserves further attention); in these cases, the remaking process is often signaled in the title, with the addition of words such as “Rearmed” (e.g. *Bionic Commando Rearmed*) or “Special Edition” (e.g. *The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition* [LucasArts, 2009]). These remakes not only involve the update of graphics and sound, but may involve a full re-design of levels and/or the addition of new features. Other games may be defined as “updated ports”. In these cases, only graphics and sound are updated. These games always provide the possibility to switch to a “classical” mode that restores the original graphics and sound. This process of “double vision” (and “double hearing”) is an actualization of what Dan Harries described when analyzing film remakes and parodies. According to Harries «Spectators of film parodies must then simultaneously engage with both the foregrounded text (the parody) and the backgrounded target».¹³ Remade or updated games on Xbox Live Arcade do not possess the ironic quality of a parody, but certainly participate in the regime of doubleness that is present in all

12 Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, BFI Publishing, London, 1999, p. 211.

13 Dan Harries, *Film Parody*, BFI Publishing, London 2008, p. 24.

remaking practices. While the continuous movement between the hyper-text and the hypo-text¹⁴ is mentalized in the film viewer (who conjures the “original” in her mind), the possibility to switch between the two in video games of this sort externalizes the peculiar duplicity of this practice.

This process of technological update seems to derive from, and at the same time inspire, a rhetoric of technological teleology that is highly present in social discourses on games and gaming. One example of this rhetoric may be found in the words of Julian Widdows, executive producer at Activision Blizzard who claimed: «I don't tend to go back to games that are 13 years old. It's an evolutionary medium and we keep building on the successes of previous games».¹⁵ Claiming that video games are “evolutionary” implies the existence of a clear convergence between the development of computer technologies and the qualitative evolution of the video game medium. This type of approach seems to reinforce and interact significantly with a trend in the critical and historiographical practice related to video game that can be defined as *technocentric*. The process of technological update enacted by the serialization in Xbox Live Arcade may be seen as both a consequence and a response to this widely spread discourse. If that of the video game is an “evolutionary” medium, evolution is here, at least partially, enforced on less evolved texts. Once again, the inclusion in a series requires a transformation of the object.

A third remodeling process is that of contextualization. In other words, old games are put into a context that defines and situates them as belonging to the past, to a supposedly golden era of arcade gaming and, more in general, identifies them as objects of nostalgia. One way of creating a context is through the description of the game offered by the distributor. In the case of *Galaga Legions* (Namco Bandai, 2008), one of the two versions of *Galaga* (Namco, 1981) found in the series, for example, the short description reads:

The original *Galaga* captivated players all over the world, and now... it's back! [...] Prepare to be hit by the second stick of nostalgic dynamite for Xbox 360 Live Arcade by the same team who brought you *Pac-Man C. E.*¹⁶

The explicit reference to nostalgia here plays a significant role in defining and positioning “classic” games, thus creating a separation with “new” games released on Xbox Live Arcade. On the one hand, contextualization is then used as a tool for disassociating preexisting games from new games released on this platform. On the other hand, paratextual materials such as the description quoted above are tools for suggesting the historical relevance of the games that are ported or remade. Another contextualizing tool can be found within the presentation of some games. One striking example is that of *Final Fight Double Impact* (Capcom, 2010). In this case, what could be defined as a *context activator* is effectively made available to the player by the possibility of experiencing the game enclosed in a visible frame, that of an arcade machine (fig. 7). Among the options presented in the menu, it is possible to select a “full arcade” mode where the frame is present and the simulation of an old CRT screen is active. The game itself then seems to become part of a wider *metagame* requiring the player to play 'as if' she was using an arcade machine. This notion of the video game as a platform for a wider gaming experience is reinforced by the fact that *Final Fight Double Impact* actually features two distinct games (*Final Fight* and *Magic Sword*); the player can choose between the two titles by selecting one coin-op machine in the main menu. *Final Fight Double Impact* is presented as a *metagame*, hosting two titles, unified by a consistent visual presentation that defines them as objects of nostalgia towards an experience – that of playing in the arcade – more than towards the games themselves. This type of visual presentation seems to underline another trend within the social and critical discourses on gaming: that of the gaming experience as a site for nostalgia. This recurring discourse is especially present in video game

14 For a detailed definition of these terms in literary theory, see Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes, la littérature au second degré*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1987, pp. 59-60.

15 Anonymous, “Q&A Julian Widdows, executive producer, Activision Blizzard”, *Edge*, no. 220, November 2010, p. 57.

16 Description of *Galaga Legions* found at <<http://marketplace.Xbox.com/en-US/Product/Galaga-Legions/66acd000-77fe-1000-9115-d802584108bb?cid=SLink>>, last visit 5 August 2011.

review shows found on Youtube such as *Classic Game Room*¹⁷ where a significant attention is devoted to gaming paraphernalia such as controllers and other accessories. This fetishization involves the gaming experience more than the game *per se* as text and is clearly present in products such as *Final Fight Double Impact*. In this sense – both in the case of *Final Fight*'s “full arcade” mode and *Classic Game Room*'s hardware reviews – a rhetoric of authenticity seems to be at work. On the one hand, a fiction CRT screen distortion overrides high definition graphics in order to elicit the player's nostalgia for the experience of the arcade; on the other, a quasi-fetishist look on original hardware underlines the alleged relevance of playing “the real thing”.

The aim of this paper was to map some of the strategies involved in the processes of serialization, recirculation and re-contextualization of old games in a complex online space such as Xbox Live Arcade. These dynamics often involve different forms of re-contextualization and canonization that significantly affect historiographical, archival and critical practices. I argue that, through the analysis of the contexts in which old games are presented, it is possible to spot some of the tendencies found in fields such as video game production, distribution, criticism and historiography, which can be and probably should be studied as interconnected and mutually influenced areas.

17 See for example an episode reviewing the Sega Master System controller. The episode can be seen at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2J4Uqwp35hM>>, last visit 5 August 2011.